

Republicans and Loyalists have united in the once-bloody streets of Belfast, luring tourists to the bullet-riddled sites and iconic wall murals of the Irish city. **Mark Dapin** takes a walk on the wild side.

Sign of the times: (below) a mural in Catholic West Belfast commemorating the Republican fight against British rule in the Easter Rising of 1916.

pack  
up  
your

# TROUBLES



McCotter takes us past St Comgall's Primary School and shows us bullet holes in the walls – a necessary component of any war tour.

Chain reaction: (right) an immortalised Bobby Sands looks down from the wall of the Sinn Féin offices in Falls Road, Belfast.



**W**HAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOUR WAR IS OVER, AND THE ONLY adult job you have ever had is as a gunman? You can sit around the club singing rebel songs with old comrades, and drink Guinness until you die. You can reinvent yourself as a youth worker, a cautionary tale for teenagers drawn to violence. You can use your military skills as a gangster. Or you can become a tour guide to your own life.

Former Irish Republican Army man Pádraic McCotter spent 15 years in prison for terrorist offences. He now takes tourists around war sites and murals along the Falls Road, the clogged artery of Catholic West Belfast. Like most tour guides, he carries a green umbrella. Unlike most tour guides, he wears an enamel Che Guevara badge.

McCotter, a stout, dapper man of a great many words, was first jailed in 1977, when he was sentenced to three years for hijacking a car. At 19, he was sent to the Maze Prison, aka Long Kesh, where Republican prisoners had been running blanket protests since their status as political prisoners – whose privileges included the right to wear their own clothes – was phased out. When the warders ordered him to wear prison uniform, he refused.

“I was very small and thin,” he says, “and I was standing naked in front of all these men, really, really afraid. I had a wee Celtic cross around my neck, and they ripped it off me and then started slapping me about. All I had was a bit of blanket around me. We’d smashed all our furniture. All we had in our cells was a mattress on the floor and a pisspot in the corner. Whenever we were going for a shower, the prison officers started beating men up, so we went on what was called a ‘no wash’ protest from March 1978. For 15 or 17 months, I didn’t wash.

“That was bad enough,” says McCotter, “but because we were throwing our rotten food in the corner, the maggots were starting to gather in the summer, so the prison officers would come along and spray really strong disinfectant in our cells. So we smashed the windows to let a bit more air in. Whenever we had a shit, we used to throw it out of the window, and at night time, when we were asleep, the screws used to come around with shovels and throw it back on top of us. So we started spreading it on the walls.”

This became known as the “dirty protest”, and led to the hunger strikes. Yet by the time Republican prisoner Bobby Sands began starving himself to death in March 1981, McCotter was free again. He was rearrested in July 1981, charged with shooting four British soldiers and a civilian in an ambush. He was on remand for 15 months, then acquitted through lack of evidence. In March 1984, he was accused of killing a prison governor. The charge was dropped.

“In March 1986,” he says, “myself and my friend were in a house about four miles away, and the RUC [Royal Ulster Constabulary] booted the door in. They shot me, they shot my friend. We were firing back, and I got 20 years.”

IN JUNE 2005, THE IRA ANNOUNCED AN END TO THE ARMED STRUGGLE, AND in May 2007, its political wing, Sinn Féin, joined the Unionists in the Northern Ireland Assembly. With the decades-long war finally over, the Unionist paramilitaries turned on each other, some Republicans drifted



Wall of words: (left) a British trooper watches for graffiti guerrillas in Belfast, 1972.

into outright criminality, and tourists began returning to Belfast. At the same time, former guerrillas and activists from both sides of the divide saw a chance to find work in the promising new travel industry, and to take control of recent history, to explain to visitors why it was that they were right all along, and why so many people had to die.

Tomorrow, I am going to tour the Shankill Road with a prominent Unionist, but today I am in the Falls with McCotter, and a tour group that includes two North American women, a German, a middle-aged couple from Melbourne, and my younger brother. The Melbourne man wears a battered Akubra, allowing him to be identified as an Australian from a distance. The Americans don’t understand the guide’s accent – or anything else – allowing them to be identified as Americans.

McCotter recounts the Republican version of the history of Ireland from 1788, with a stenographer’s regard for detail and a race caller’s frantic pace. He tells the story of the Young Ireland Movement, the United Irishmen, the Easter Rising, the Civil Rights movement. When he is finished, he asks for questions.

The Australians have one: how is it, they want to know, that with all this history of hatred and sectarianism, northern Protestants can play alongside Irish Catholics in the Irish cricket team?

MCCOTTER LEADS US TO A ROW OF TERRACE houses protected by steel bars that reach higher than their roofs. These houses in cages mark one of 17 Belfast “interfaces”, where Protestant and Catholic communities live side by side, separated

by about 4.5 kilometres of fences and “peace walls”. Similar barriers guard homes on both sides from bricks and bombs. He takes us past St Comgall’s Primary School and shows us bullet holes in the walls – a necessary component of any war tour.

Painted on the side of the old Andrews Flour Mill are murals supposed to express Republican solidarity with the oppressed peoples of the earth. An Israeli soldier aims a rifle at an unarmed Palestinian woman, and George W. Bush appears to be using a death mound of Iraqis as fuel for his hookah pipe. The tradition of mural painting in Northern Ireland goes back to the introduction of internment without trial for terrorist suspects in 1971. The mass media in Britain and Ireland were banned from reporting statements by Republican leaders, and the Republican community had no way of putting forward its point of view: that its men were not terrorists and that the IRA was its army. People began to display their rage on the gable walls of their homes, in murals painted to honour gunmen killed by the British or the RUC, while other murals marked the territories of both Loyalist and Republican paramilitaries.

With the “normalisation” that followed the ceasefire, the government encouraged people to paint over the paramilitary murals, and replace recent history with ancient history.

“The famine is a big one,” says Siobhan O’Dwyer, of the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders. “Ordinary people in West Belfast couldn’t give a shit about the famine. But they did care about having ‘Troops out of Ireland’ and ‘We support the IRA’ murals, and

murals to the people who were killed. Those things meant something. [The newer murals] are just a way of painting the walls. People are being told to come in and paint those on. It's an industry."

The most famous mural on the Falls Road commemorates the life and death of Bobby Sands, the leader of the 1981 hunger strikes, who died of starvation in Long Kesh after having been elected as an MP for the seat of Fermanagh and South Tyrone in the UK Parliament. Nine more Republican prisoners followed Sands to the cemetery.

It is while he is standing in front of the Bobby Sands mural that McCotter describes his own life in Long Kesh. He is an impressive man – knowledgeable, committed, articulate and unbowed – but, until he was released from the prison, the only career he had ever had was as an urban guerilla, fighting for a united, socialist Ireland.

Three years ago, he became a training officer and guide for Coiste Political Tours, showing strangers around the Falls Road twice a week, in a divided, capitalist Ireland. If this is not what he imagined for himself, he will not admit it.

He does not regret his prison time.

"Whether you agree with it or not, people have an interest in it," he says, chirpily.



**Herd mentality:** (above) a Belfast child, wearing a cow mask, keeps his distance from an armed British trooper, circa 1970.

"at times you'd have a riot going on", says Gough, involving "at most 300 to 400 people, sometimes as little as 50". They fought with bricks and bottles and "sometimes you'd have guns".

It is all over now. The demographics of the various constituencies are settled for at least a generation. "The only thing that happens nowadays is during the school holidays the kids might have a wee go at each other," says Gough. "Instead of skateboarding or something, they have to have a wee riot."

Ironically, the war in Northern Ireland was more of a fight about civil rights and economic equality than the sectarian-based conflict it was made out to be, but now the political differences between the two sides have been buried, all that is left is children throwing stones at Papists and Prods.

And children fought in the real war, too. In Tigers Bay, there is a mural to Glen Branagh, a 16-year-old member of the youth wing of the UDA/UFF (Ulster Freedom Fighters), who died when the bomb he was carrying exploded in his hand. Painted in his baseball cap, he looks ethereally young, a virgin suicide.

We pass through the Republican stronghold of New Lodge, and pause at the police station, which



**We stop at the site of the worst violence, where "at times you'd have a riot going on", says Gough, involving "at most 300 to 400 people, sometimes as little as 50". They fought with bricks and bottles and "sometimes you'd have guns".**

**For God and Ulster:** (left) memorials to the Ulster Volunteer Force are openly displayed in Unionist North Belfast.

**T**HE REPUBLICANS TELL THEIR STORY WITH angry, mournful grace. They have had centuries of practice, weaving suffering into balladry, death into poetry, revolution into theatre, and raising money from Irish-Americans, while simultaneously mastering the drab vocabulary of Marxism to win the solidarity of Third World liberation movements. The Unionists, on the other hand, have not handled their PR well.

For the past three years, Stephen Gough, a strongly built, shaven-headed businessman, has run tours of Belfast from a Loyalist perspective.

"We're acutely aware that we don't get our message across," he says. "We're not very good at communication. We don't have the same resources. Loyalism/Unionism just seems to go from one crisis to the next. We are trying to get a better plan, a way forward, but unfortunately, in recent years, a lot of our time has been spent, I suppose you could say, fighting each other."

Gough's exact political affiliations are unclear, but he is an activist, not a paramilitary man. He

drives tourists around Belfast in his small car, and so covers much more of the city than the Coiste tours. He has only me and my brother with him this morning, as he cruises through North Belfast, where Unionist areas are firmly UDA (Ulster Defence Association) or UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force), and the writing on the walls proclaims which faction is in charge. At the Mount Vernon estate, the murals are more military, less celebratory, and more threatening than those that remain on the Falls Road (the Republicans still have their balaclava-and-rifles pictures, too, but they are out of plain sight). We pause outside the estate, before driving on to Tigers Bay where in 2002, says Gough, Protestant residents came under heavy attack from Republicans, who were trying to drive them out to create a Nationalist majority in North Belfast.

"Unionists/Loyalists also attacked – reprisals and that sort of thing," says Gough, "but there was a sustained campaign, where Protestants/Unionists were forced to abandon their homes."

We stop at the site of the worst violence, where

is fortified like a maximum security jail. "In the early days, when Republicans blew up a police station, they brought workers in to rebuild [it], then the IRA shot the workers," says Gough. "To make sure they weren't blown up again, the government built these huge walls, so whenever a car bomb went off, the blast was deflected across the street to the houses on the other side, and the police station remained virtually intact. Of course, the people who lived in the houses on the other side of the street were the IRA's own people.

"I'm gonna have to pull into the garage," he announces, suddenly. He has not been shot; his fan belt has snapped. The car stutters into the forecourt of a service station, across the road from a retail park that backs onto a peace wall. All over Belfast, business parks provided a comically permeable barrier that the government used to try to keep the communities apart. The longer I spend in the city, the more I marvel at the government's faith in offices and gates to keep out bullets and grenades, its determination to deny a civil war.



Barry takes us home past the Europa Hotel, which, he explains, is the “most bombed hotel in Europe”. “Bad service?” asks my brother.

Change of art: (left) murals with a conciliatory message are beginning to replace those with military themes.

Gough is much more shy than McCotter when it comes to talk about his political activism.

“I ended up in hospital one time from Republican violence,” he says, while we wait for a mechanic. “They booby-trapped the fanbelt.”

(Gough is a funny guy. When my brother later disappears around a corner to snap a picture of a mural, Gough says, “He’s been captured.”)

As to his injuries at the hands of Republicans, “it happened twice”, says Gough. “It’s just one of those things you go through.”

But *what* happened?

“Can’t remember.”

Pressed further, he admits, “On one of the occasions, four or five years ago, I was attacked by a crowd, let’s put it like that. I had seven staples in my head. And they don’t wipe the blood away or anything, so it all congealed around the staples. You know when you get a staple gun and you staple paper together, and it sticks? Imagine that happening to your head.”

**L**IKE THE REPUBLICANS, THE UNIONISTS ARE under pressure to paint nicer murals. In Protestant areas, there are now at least three huge paintings of the late, great soccer star, George Best, and one of *The Chronicles of Narnia* author C.S. Lewis, who fought with the 36th Ulster Division in World War I.

“Paramilitary murals are a thing of the past, really,” says Gough. “We have to look at our history, and pick out parts that we believe should be put on a wall.”

It seems Gough’s car is finished for the day, so he calls his mate Barry to drive us back to our hotel via the Union Jack Shop on Shankill Road.

Busy, shabby, vibrant and poor, Shankill Road is a mirror of Falls Road, except the area is smaller, and there are pictures of the Queen instead of Bobby Sands. Union Jacks fly all over the place, and many of them come from the Union Jack Shop, the base for Gough’s tour operation.

Most Loyalist households raise the flag on July 12, in commemoration of the Battle of the Boyne in 1690, but the friendly lady in the Union Jack Shop is quick to point out she does not only sell Union Jacks. “There are all the flags from around the world,” she says. “We’ve even got [an Irish] tricolour.”

How many of those does she sell?

“We only sell them on July 11,” she admits, “when they burn the poor things.”

Barry takes us home past the Europa Hotel, which, he explains, is the “most bombed hotel in Europe”. “Bad service?” asks my brother.

The status of the Europa Hotel seems to be a source of civic pride in Belfast, and Gough, too, quotes the “most bombed” claim when he drives us through the centre to Shankill Road in the evening, in his newly repaired car.

The Shankill and many of its side streets are extensively decorated with murals. Although some painters are better than others – and the Republicans, on balance, seem to have the artistic edge – there are no Diego Riveras among Belfast’s muralists. The prevailing style across both communities is a socialist realist take on graffiti art. The power of the pictures comes from their emotional content. Now the war is over, the Loyalists are searching their own history for tales of persecution and dispossession, to be commemorated in painting, poem and song for the next 200 years.

One of their most moving murals dominates the UDA stronghold of lower Shankill Road. It shows the aftermath of Republican attacks on a local bar, a pub, a fish shop and a furniture showroom, under the bitter banner: “30 Years of indiscriminate slaughter by the so-called non-sectarian Irish freedom fighters. No military targets. No economic targets. No legitimate targets.”

“The reason this has been put here is this is one of the tourist bus routes,” says Gough. “The Republicans have been very successful in the last 15 years in putting themselves across as non-sectarian: ‘We only killed policemen’, ‘We only killed members of the security forces’, ‘We never killed innocent people’. People believed it. If you tell the same lie over and over again, people will believe it.”

In the Lower Shankill Road, a UDA stronghold, Gough tries to justify sectarian murders by his own side. “This is where Johnny Adair ran his kingdom from,” says Gough, “and he ruled with an iron fist. He was in charge of a ruthless gang of men who carried out plenty of murders of IRA men and innocent people – but at the end of the day, no matter who the Loyalists killed, it all had an impact, because it was telling the IRA, ‘You can’t defend your people.’ It’s as simple as that.”

**I** AM DRINKING GUINNESS WITH MY BROTHER in the Rex Bar, a UVF pub on Shankill Road, when a big, garrulous man comes to join us at our table by the door. He introduces himself as Joe Stewart, one of the most prominent UVF mural painters. I don't know whether he came to the pub to see us, or just came to the pub and saw us, but suddenly we are in his car, travelling through estates at night.

He says he has painted more than 200 murals in the past 29 years. A lot of them have come down recently, but he does not think those that commemorate the dead will go.

Stewart has a seat on the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, and is working to develop more regular tours of Shankill Road, with local history told from the Unionist point of view.

He parks his car at a gallery of gable walls in Woodvale, an area of North Belfast where the UDA/UFF and the UVF both have local support.

"This is a Loyalist murdered by the UFF during a feud here about five years ago," says Stewart, singling out a mural. "Sam Rockett, one of the young people who worked for me. He was baby-sitting, he lived in a UDA area and he felt comfortable, he was told that nothing would happen to him, and he was murdered.

"This fella here, Trevor King, was murdered by the IRA, he was shot down just about where we were drinking a few minutes ago, in 1994." Also commemorated is UVF gunman Brian Robinson, who was shot dead in 1989 by an undercover British soldier, nicknamed "the Angel of Death", a few minutes after Robinson killed Catholic Patrick McKenna.

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**I don't know if it is the weight of the Guinness or the weight of history, but I find myself suddenly wary of the accusing stares of martyrs' eyes.**

**Carved in stone:** (above) the author (third from left, with guide Pádraic McCotter, third from right) visits the monument to fallen Nationalist volunteers and civilians at the Falls Garden of Remembrance.



denly wary of the accusing stares of martyrs' eyes: of the faces of men killed by the army, by a guerrilla army, or by their own side. The murals may be Belfast's memory but, for the sake of the future, some things may have to be acknowledged then forgotten.

Once or twice, the Republican and Loyalist tours have converged. "Occasionally, we will pass [tour groups] on to Loyalists in the Shankill Road," says McCotter. The week before I met him, McCotter had walked through the heart of the Unionist community for the first time in 40 years, chaperoned by William Smith, a former Red Hand Commando (UVF militiaman). They were taking students and tourists on the first combined tour of both areas.

"So four of us who'd been IRA prisoners of war

were walking down the Shankill Road," says McCotter. "We weren't nervous, but we were conscious of it."

Did he and Smith get on all right on the tour?

"Oh aye, yes, oh aye," says McCotter. "We were talking away. We were friendly."

The new tourism has its own dynamic, however. Travellers come to a resurgent Belfast to touch terrorism, to feel just a little in danger, as if there really is a chance their brother might be "captured". They want to be taken around by a man who has been shot – or at least had staples in his head – and stay in the most bombed hotel in Europe. They are here to see murals of Bobby Sands, not C.S. Lewis. The war may be over for the guerrillas, but it has to be kept alive for the tourists. **GW**